



## **(U) Senior Executive or GS-15: What's the Difference?**

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(U//FOUO) As a follow-up to the recent article [\(U\) Changes in the Senior Executive Service](#), SIDtoday asked a recently elevated Senior, [REDACTED], to describe what has changed for him ...

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### **Question: (U) Last year you were elevated to Senior Executive level from GS-15. In your experience, are there major differences between working as a GS employee and as a Senior?**

(U) In some ways, there are no differences. I don't think I am working with greater intensity than I did before I was elevated, for example, and certainly no harder than my colleagues at any other grade or rank. So it's not about "I work harder now." From another perspective, though, there is a real difference. There is more at stake now -- less room for error and, when I do make mistakes, the consequences can be much more dramatic and lot more visible. I'm not talking about "learning in public;" there's nothing wrong with that. But at the senior level, I think you have to be aware of the fact that your actions have an impact on others and that you can harm whole organizations, partnerships and individuals if you behave in a cavalier manner or don't have your facts straight.

(U) On the other hand, you have an amazing opportunity to make dreams a reality, to pull powerful teams together capable of remarkable feats, to help other people grow, stretch and realize their potential. I'll never forget the seniors who took chances on me along the way; now I have an obligation to do the same for others.

### **Question: (U) What surprised you the most about how your life changed as a result of this promotion?**

(U) Some people (mostly those who don't know me very well) look at me with some kind of expectation that I have all the answers. Now THAT'S surprising! But as one of my bosses likes to say, getting promoted and a new job at a higher level doesn't make you any smarter than you were before. In fact, I'm at a place right now where I need help and support more than ever. If I start behaving like I have all the answers, I'm going to get into deep trouble, probably soon! As is the case with any leader regardless of level, you have to be confident and strong, but you cannot be arrogant.

(U//FOUO) Another thing that surprised me is how often I find myself reaching back to lessons learned in other jobs. I catch myself reflecting on:

- what I learned about respecting others from the best branch chief I ever had when I was working the Soviet military target,
- what team chiefs and technical experts in the old "SILKWORTH ROF" taught me about change and its impact on people,
- what I learned about transferring mission to an RSOC and the critical importance of collaboration from the chiefs of the China/Korea Product Line I had the honor to serve,
- what I learned about support to warfighters in places like Afghanistan and Iraq as the Deputy Chief of the GeoCell,
- what I learned about the "business of SIGINT" as the leader of S2's Planning, Architecture, Requirements and Performance Metrics office, and
- the new skills I acquired on Issue Management Teams.

You can't get to the senior level without the help and support of the people around you (that's no surprise!); I am so indebted to everyone who got me to this place.

**Question: (U) What do you consider to be the role of a DISES here at NSA?**

(U//FOUO) My experiences in the GeoCell and on the Counterterrorism and Asia-Pacific Issue Management Teams without question helped prepare me for "senior" roles that are already critical. **How to lead a federated effort**, for example, when you are responsible for achieving success on a global scale but do not "own" all the resources you need, or necessarily have the formal authority to go with the responsibility. Collaboration used to mean inviting the team next door to your meetings; these days -- and for years to come -- we will be challenged repeatedly to expand that definition far beyond any comfort zone I can imagine sitting here today.

(U//FOUO) Our corporate vision for the future uses words like "net-centric," "horizontal integration" and "self-synchronizing." But there is no accompanying manual defining exactly what these terms mean, or a working aid that lays out what we're supposed to do to make them achievable and real. Traditional organizational design and behavior do not default to the kind of collaborating, sharing, and trusting that are required to self-synchronize anything -- especially across agencies within the intelligence and defense communities. And there's no universal truth or natural law that will just make it happen. In fact, it's probably a lot more natural for leaders -- especially when under a lot of pressure -- to play the "just do it because I said so" card. So **the "self-synchronizing" system will have to be managed** if it is going to become real and successful, and every senior executive will have a role to play in that, no doubt.

**Question: (U) What is your favorite part of the job? Your least favorite?**

(U) The favorite part of any job I've held has always been creating the right environment for individuals to grow and shine, which in turn always leads to dramatic mission success. As a senior, you are given a rare opportunity to do that on a larger scale, and that is very exciting and motivating. My least favorite part? I'm not sure about that, but coping with a seemingly infinite email queue is probably right up there!

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